

WHAT INFLUENCES STUDENTS TO CHOOSE THE ELEMENTARY EDUCATION MAJOR: THE CASE OF CYPRUS

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Abstract – *The purpose of this study was to identify and compare the factors that have motivated third and fourth year students at the University of Cyprus to choose the elementary school teaching profession. The sample consisted of 176 students that were studying elementary education during the Fall of 1995. The questionnaire was administered to all students that were enrolled in certain elementary education classes which were selected randomly. Responses to the questionnaire items were factored using the principal components analysis with varimax rotation. Six factors were retained and they accounted for 63.3 percent of the variance. The first factor was accounted for 18.3 percent of the variance in the six factor solution. Items in this factor with loadings greater than 0.50 concerned the students' ideas about: love of teaching, love of the teaching / learning process, love of working with young children, and inborn talent for teaching. This factor was called 'internal motives'. The second factor accounted for 15.3 percent of the variance and included items describing vacations, immediate employment, job possibilities, secure job, and fringe benefits, and was called 'job benefits'. The third factor accounted for 9.7 percent of the variance and was called 'status of the profession'. The fourth factor accounted for 8.3 percent of the variance and was called 'relatives' influences'. The fifth and sixth factor accounted for 6.4 and 5.3 percent of the variance respectively and were called 'external motives' and 'teacher influence'.*

Introduction

The philosopher Henry Adams stated that, 'a teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops'. In addition, Smith (1986) adds that '[teaching] is a profession that profoundly affects the lives of every individual, and ultimately the strength and well-being of the nation.' (p.39). Furthermore societies today place a considerable emphasis on elementary schools, and expect a lot from teachers (MacLean, 1992). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that teaching should require complete dedication and utmost competence as far as the role of the

teacher is concerned. 'A teacher is expected to be the possessor of knowledge which he [or she] can successfully impart to children;... he [or she] must see clearly the major goals toward which education is to be directing his [or her] society and to do his [or her] part to see that these goals are accomplished.' (Edman, 1968, p.12). On the other hand, elementary school teaching reaches children at an early stage when the students are more malleable, and able to incorporate the attitudes and habits on which to build their future success (Ornstein, 1978; Parelius, 1987). Therefore, the identification and recruitment of the appropriate people into teaching, and especially into the elementary school teaching majors in Colleges and Universities should be emphasised as one of the most important educational concerns today.

According to Niles and Herr (1989), the task of job selection requires the individual to be aware of how his or her interests, values, and abilities relate to specific occupations. Sometimes students choose to become teachers because they like teaching and working with children. Other students, however, choose to become teachers because they were not admitted in the major of their choice (Ornstein, 1983; Parkay and Hardcastle, 1991). These major differences in motivation raise questions about factors that influence students to become teachers. Thus, the purpose of this study is to identify and compare the factors that have motivated third and fourth year students at the University of Cyprus to choose the elementary school teaching profession. An understanding of these factors can help improve the selection of the teaching force in Cyprus so that only the most and best qualified individuals will undergo training. Thus, this is where the significance of this study lies.

For the purpose of this research, the factors that have influenced students to choose to major in elementary education at the University of Cyprus were divided into three categories: intrinsic, extrinsic and alternative factors. The intrinsic factors are associated with the act of teaching itself, and with the values that students hold for themselves. These factors include the love of children, the inborn talent for teaching, and the excitement and interest in the teaching/learning process. The alternative factors are associated with interpersonal influences which refers to the cases where students choose to become teachers because their relatives had persuaded them to do so. Finally, the third category that is labelled as extrinsic factors, includes the benefits that are attached to the teaching profession, and which influence students to enter the teaching major. Such benefits are the status of the profession, the relatively short working hours, vacations, immediate or definite employment, and salary, which are experienced by all public school teachers in Cyprus.

Since teaching involves constant interaction and involvement with other human beings, a strong love for, and interest in students is one of the factors that

influences individuals to enter the teaching profession. In a study that was done by Ashikali and Agathokleous (1995), elementary education students considered the factor labelled as 'love of children' as the most important influential factor for choosing this profession. According to Parkay and Hardcastle (1991), people who love teaching are generally attracted by the process and the spontaneous aspects of teaching. They take full advantage of every teaching moment and make the most out of it. Teaching is also a learning process since one can learn any subject in depth just by teaching it (Parkay and Hardcastle, 1991). Therefore, the fascination of discovering knowledge is still another attraction of teaching. As far as the love of the whole teaching/learning process is concerned, students according to Menelaou and Panagi (1994) had ranked it as the fourth out of 10 probable influential factors that had influenced their decision to enter the elementary education major.

Teachers in Cyprus are frequently considered to have short working days and long vacations. The average length of the required five day work week for all teachers in Cyprus is from 7:30-13:30. This is one of the reasons why many college students are attracted to the working schedule of this profession (Michaelidou and Siakalli, 1994). Another important factor that attracts students to major in elementary education in Cyprus is because they are guaranteed by the government to be employed as teachers during the academic year after they graduate (Ioannou and Christodoulou 1994). In Cyprus, the beginning elementary school teachers earn \$17,118, which is \$6,692 higher than the per capita income of the country (Department of Statistics and Research, 1994). Therefore, teachers' salaries are also another major extrinsic attraction for entering the teaching major. The factors of salary, fringe benefits and appointment are all major variables that determine the status of the teaching profession in elementary schools, just like any other profession (Edman, 1968). To the above, Demetriadou (1982) adds that the status of the teaching profession also depends on the quality of the teachers' training, as well as on the quality of the services that teachers provide to the society in which they work. However, the status of the teaching profession, like that of any other profession, varies greatly from country to country. For example, Feistritzer (1986) found that this factor was ranked second in dissatisfaction among public school teachers who were drawn from a nationwide poll in the US. In Cyprus, however, Papaperikleous and Hatziiannakou (1995) found that the elementary school teaching profession is among the most influential in Cypriot society generally.

The alternative factors that influence students to major in elementary education include parents, and extended relatives. The strongest single influence for students is usually that of their parents or other extended relatives with whom they come in daily contact (Parkay and Hardcastle, 1991). Students, and

all children in general appreciate the advice of their elders, and often consider it indispensable. However, according to Menelaou and Panagidi (1994), students in the elementary education major in Cyprus do not seem to be influenced strongly by their relatives.

The selection procedure of students for teacher training in Cyprus tends to be very competitive. In order to be admitted to the Department of Education in the University of Cyprus, students have to compete with approximately 2,000 other candidates in the fiercely competitive University Entrance Examinations. According to the Cyprus Ministry of Education, during the examinations for admission to the 1995-96 academic year, 2,334 candidates had competed for the elementary education major. Among these candidates, only 150 are admitted in the major every year. Since these examinations are highly competitive, the students that eventually get those positions, are the best out of all the candidates. According to Papanastasiou (1989), the high-school GPA of the students that are eventually accepted into this major averaged 92 out of 100 while they were seniors in high school. These students have also ranked among the top 10% of the candidates that wanted to enter the elementary education major. Therefore, the accessibility of entry can not be considered as a factor that influences students in Cyprus to choose teaching as a career.

Method

Subjects

For the purpose of this study, the sample for the study consisted of 176 students, out of 300, which is 58.7% of all third and fourth year students that were studying elementary education at the University of Cyprus during the Fall of 1995. Half of the 300 students of the population were Juniors and the other half were Seniors. Among the 176 students of the sample, 51.1% were third graders and 48.9% were fourth graders, 13.1% were male and 86.9% were female.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire which was designed by the investigators, was based on a framework of three main factors, the intrinsic, the extrinsic and the circumstantial one, and used a five point Likert-type scale. The number one of the scale represents the statement that the students 'absolutely agree' with specific items on the questionnaire, and the number five that the students 'absolutely disagree'. The final version of the questionnaire includes two parts. The first part includes 18 questions that ask for the students' opinions about

reasons that made them choose to major in elementary education. The second part of the questionnaire includes only three questions that ask about demographic information. These questions ask about the student's gender, how many years they have been studying at the university, as well as their GPA while they were Seniors in high school.

Procedure

In order to see if the questionnaire that was devised was adequate to accomplish the study's goals, a pilot study was carried out. For the pilot study, 10 questionnaires were administered to students studying elementary education. The participants completed the questionnaires, and wrote notes on any questions they were unsure of. Those notes were taken into consideration when preparing the final version of the questionnaire.

The questionnaires were handed out to all students who were enrolled in certain elementary education classes which were selected randomly from the university. For representative purposes, an equal number of Junior and Senior classes were selected for this study. The professors of the selected classes gave permission to the researchers to administer the questionnaires at the beginning of each period and they were handed back approximately fifteen minutes later.

Statistical analysis

The first type of analysis performed was factor analysis. The purpose of using factor analysis was to identify the factors that could be used to explain why students that are studying elementary education have chosen this specific major. In other words the goal was to find the main reasons that account for the desire of third and fourth year students to become elementary school teachers. By finding these factors we could distinguish which factors are the most important and which are not. Before using factor analysis it was necessary to ascertain that such technique could be used. Two of the statistics that were used are the Barlett's test of sphericity and the KMO. The values from this analysis supported the use of factor analysis.

The second type of analysis performed was MANOVA. The purpose of using this statistical technique was to test the hypothesis that there is no difference between the population means and the hypothesized values which is the median value of the Likert-scale used in the questionnaire. In other words we test the hypothesis that there is no influence on the students, based on the six factors which came out from factor analysis.

Results

Responses to the questionnaire items were factored using the principal components analysis with varimax rotation. Six factors were retained based on the Scree test (Cattell, 1966), and they accounted for 63.3 percent of the variance. The rotated factor loadings are shown in Table 1. The first factor was clearly the most important, since it accounted for 18.3 percent of the variance in the six factor solution. All of the items in this factor with loadings greater than 0.50 concerned the students' ideas about the following; love of teaching, love of the teaching/learning process, love of working with young children, and inborn talent for teaching. This factor was therefore called 'internal motives'. The second factor accounted for 15.3 percent of the variance and included items describing vacations, immediate employment, job possibilities, secure job, and fringe benefits, and was called 'job benefits'. The third factor accounted for 9.7 percent of the variance, and the items with high loadings dealt with students' perceptions about the status of the profession and people's valuation of teachers. This factor was called 'status of the profession'. The fourth factor accounted for 8.3 percent of the variance, and consisted of items referring to the students' encouragement by their families to enter this major. This factor was called 'relatives' influences'. The fifth factor accounted for 6.4 percent of the variance and concerned students' ideas about the high salaries, the few working hours, and the possibilities of reaching high steps in the hierarchy of the profession, and was called 'external motives'. The sixth factor accounted for 5.3 percent of the variance and included two items describing the encouragement of the teacher and the teacher as such. This factor was called 'teacher influence'.

The results of using MANOVA indicate statistical significance (Hotelling's $T^2 = 8.5, p < 0.01$) which means that the hypothesis that the population means do not differ from the hypothesised constant is rejected. Since the hypothesis of no difference is rejected the univariate test was used to get some idea of where the difference may be. The results are summarised in Table 2. According to the results shown in this table, it is clear that the factor 'relatives influences' is not significant.

Based on the results of both tables it seems that the students in Cyprus agree to strongly agree that the factor 'job benefits', had influenced them the most to choose the elementary education profession. The factor of 'job benefits' consisted of the following items: long vacations that are available for teachers, job security, immediate employment after graduation, as well as many fringe benefits that are associated with the teaching profession. Statistical significant difference was found with this factor.

A second result shows that the students indicated that they merely agree that they have chosen the elementary education major because of internal motives.

TABLE 1: Varimax Rotated Factor Matrix

Questionnaire items	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	X	s
05 I love teaching	0.89						2.07	0.93
06 I love teaching/Learning process	0.81						2.13	0.91
07 I love working with young children	0.80						1.93	0.91
18 I believe I have an inborn talent for teaching	0.73						2.59	0.91
03 Teachers have long vacations		0.53					1.76	0.89
12 Teachers are employed immediately after graduation		0.86					1.32	0.70
13 Teachers have many job possibilities		0.74					1.57	0.91
16 Teaching is a secure job		0.74					1.54	0.78
17 Teaching profession includes many fringe benefits		0.51					2.02	0.93
01 Teaching is a high status profession			0.78				2.57	0.96
15 People in other occupations value teachers			0.78				2.85	0.96
10 My parents have encouraged me to become teacher				0.79			2.35	1.24
11 A relative of mine has encouraged me to become teacher				0.80			3.48	1.47
02 Teachers earn high salaries					0.62		2.52	1.00
04 Teachers do not have to work for many hours					0.56		3.99	1.21
14 Teachers get promoted easily					0.62		3.73	0.87
08 A teacher of mine has encouraged me to become a teacher						0.86	4.18	1.10
09 I want to model a teacher of mine						0.80	4.13	1.08

TABLE 2: Cell means, *s* and univariate *F*-tests

Factors	X	s	Hypoth.SS	Error MS	F	p
F1. Internal motives	-0.81	0.75	116.0	0.56	207.2	.00
F2. Job benefits	-1.35	0.61	319.3	0.37	849.9	.00
F3 Status of the profession	-0.29	0.84	14.6	0.70	20.8	.00
F4 Relatives influences	-0.08	1.17	1.0	1.37	0.8	.38
F5 External motives	0.41	0.69	29.9	0.48	62.4	.00
F6 Teacher influence	1.15	0.93	232.0	0.87	265.2	.00

This suggests that the students have chosen the elementary education major firstly because of the job benefits, and secondly because of internal motives.

The next significant factor was the 'status of the profession'. The students that took part in this study were influenced to a lesser degree by this factor, which includes questions about if teaching is a high status occupation, as well as questions about how highly teachers are valued by society in general. The fourth result shows that the 'relatives' influences' factor is not statistical significant which means that the students are uncertain about the extent to which parents as well as more distant relatives influenced them. The students neither agreed, nor disagreed that they were influenced by this factor to enter the elementary school teaching major. A fifth result shows that the students have disagreed with the factor labeled as 'external motives', which includes the items of high salaries available for teachers, of few working hours, and of easy promotions. Finally the students disagree to strongly disagree that the factor 'teacher influence' has influenced them to choose elementary education as major.

Discussion

The major purpose of this study was to identify and compare the factors that had influenced students at the University of Cyprus to major in elementary education. The strongest factor that influenced students to major in elementary education was that of 'job benefits'. The next most influential factor for the students were 'internal motives'. The items 'teachers are employed immediately after graduation', 'teaching is a secure job', 'teachers have many job possibilities' and 'teachers have long vacations' were ranked higher than the 'love of teaching

children' and the 'love of working with young children'. This might be because the extrinsic aspects of elementary school teaching positions are so rewarding in Cyprus, that most people associate the teaching profession with those factors (e.g. secure job, guaranteed employment, fringe benefits), instead of associating the profession more with internal motives and with their personal interests. Students in Cyprus are guaranteed employment after graduation, while their teaching position is also secured after two years of teaching. Therefore, it is reasonable for Cypriot students to strongly agree that they have entered the elementary school teaching major because of the job security. In general though the students tend to agree that the love of teaching, the teaching/learning process and working with young children are important elements that influenced them to become teachers.

Another result from the responses is that in general the students were uncertain about the amount of influence of their parents to choose the elementary education profession. This means that some of the students were influenced by their parents to become teachers and some they were not. On the one hand it seems that the parents who influenced the students to become teachers did so because they believe that this profession will be beneficial for their children, especially since there are so many Cypriots with college degrees who cannot find employment in Cyprus. On the other hand the reason that some other parents were not so influential on their child's choice of majoring in elementary education could be because of the independence of the new generation, which is based on their abilities, as well as their knowledge of society.

By reviewing the results of this study, one can see that the students from the University of Cyprus have been influenced mostly by two factors: by the job benefits and by internal motives. It is quite discouraging, though, to observe that the Cypriot students give more emphasis to the factor 'job benefits' and less to the internal motives factor. It is true that by providing attractive extrinsic benefits to candidates who want to enter the teaching major, the most qualified individuals are eventually accepted. However, these motives also manage to attract students that are motivated by intrinsic factors as well, which seems to be the case in Cyprus.

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